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SUBJECT: THAILAND: THAKSIN SIGNALS SHIFT IN SOUTH POLICY

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1. (SBU) Summary: On March 30, Prime Minister Thaksin, speaking to a joint session of parliament, surprised the political establishment by suggesting that the RTG would take a less security focused approach towards Thailand's troubled far south. Thaksin's conciliatory tone, with statements such as "violence only begets violence," is a dramatic shift away from past tough talk about the south. On March 31, Thaksin indicated that troops would have a less visible presence in the South, but would not, as some reports had indicated, be withdrawn. Thaksin's conciliatory speech, and the recent formation of a National Reconciliation Commission, or NRC (reftel), are positive developments for a region that has received or produced only bad news of late. However, Thaksin's promise to use a less security focused approach might meet with some internal resistance from Thai security forces. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On March 30, Prime Minister Thaksin addressed a rare joint session of parliament. He had convoked the special session to debate the violence-plagued far south of Thailand. Thaksin, showing uncharacteristic humility, admitted to policy missteps in the region, "I am now determined to undo what I have done wrong in the past." The Prime Minister also backed down from his usual tough rhetoric, agreeing with critics that a less security focused approach was called for, "violence only breeds violence" he said.

3. (SBU) Thaksin was also surprisingly conciliatory towards opposition leader Aphisit Vejjajiva, saying the Democrat Party leader's views on the South "are mostly consistent with my thinking." Continuing his praise for his main political rival Thaksin said, "I admire your presentation and accept all your 9-point proposed approach to the southern unrest for further implementation." (Note: The 9-point Democrat plan calls for the government to: 1) cancel plans to withhold government development funding from "red zone" villages blamed for harboring militants; 2) increase development projects; 3) name a civilian official, vice military, to coordinate regional government programs; 4) compensate victims of the violence; 5) improve the southern economy; 6) improve education in the South; 7) encourage local officials to learn about Islamic culture; 8) allow international organizations to access the South to help; 9) follow the advice of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). End Note.)

4. (SBU) Thaksin also reiterated his public endorsement of the 48-member National Reconciliation Commission which, under the leadership of Anand Panyarachun, a highly respected and politically independent former Prime Minister, is tasked with developing policy recommendations for the troubled south. Thaksin said, "I would like to see it use its independent role, offer diverse views and dimensions, and I confirm full governmental support and readiness to respond to its requests."

5. (SBU) Speaking to reporters on March 31, Thaksin seemed to indicate that troops would be "withdrawn" from the far south as part of the government's new strategy. He said "adjustments are imminent." However, the military was quick to clarify that "adjustments" did not mean that actual troop levels would be reduced in the south; instead troops would have a less visible presence, or would work on civil-military projects instead of security missions only. General Sirichai Tunyasiri, who heads the Southern Border Provinces Peace-building Command (SBPPC) and acts as the coordinator for all Thai security forces in the region, said that troops would be repositioned in the South, but "absolutely will not be pulled out of the region."

7. (SBU) Comment: Thaksin's assuaging remarks in front of both houses of Parliament are a welcome change from past rhetoric or inflammatory off-the-cuff remarks about the south. The Prime Minister's apparent new policy flexibility on the south, coupled with the appointment of the politically independent NRC, are positive signs that the administration may be learning from the policy failures of the last two years. However, if he tries to move too far away from a security-based strategy for the South, Thaksin could face

internal resistance from hard-liners within the RTG security forces. This seems to be the implication of the rapid clarification by the SBPPC that no troops would actually be withdrawn from the troubled far south. End Comment.
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